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Subject: Pop-up Tag Study of large striped bass

I would like to address some comments made by David Agee and the CCA concerning the proposed study of our winter-time large striped bass fishery through the use of pop-up satellite tags.

Both are under the assumption that hook and release mortality of this fishery is already understood. That is an incorrect assumption. The fact is, we do not have any idea of what is happening with large striped bass released in this cold-water, high salinity fishery. We assume a release mortality of about 8% but we do not know if this estimate is close, too high or too low.

Studies done in lower salinity, warmer water, and with smaller fish just do not tell us what is happening in this fishery. The sheer size of these fish make it difficult to conduct hook-and-release studies. You have to have live-wells large enough to keep 40-50 pound rockfish healthy until you can get them to whatever enclosure you are going to keep them in. This process increases the stress placed on the fish. The CCA thinks that Virginia could get a credit from ASMFC if we went to circle hooks with this live bait fishery. How? There is no science to support it. This technology has the potential of giving us that data.

The CCA complains that the small number of tags is not likely to lead to any regulatory changes. They may be right but they may be wrong also because this is exactly what happened. A small, pilot study of 10 tags was placed on blue marlin caught in long-line gear. Up to this point, any marlin caught on long-line gear by the international fleet was killed. They assumed they were dead anyway. The fish in this small study lived. Because of this 10-tag study, all marlin caught in the Atlantic on long-line gear which are still alive now must be released. Can you imagine the Japanese commercial fleet releasing marlin? Because of this technology and 10 tags, that is what is happening. The latest stock assessment done after this new regulation shows the first increase in the white marlin population, a species that was almost placed on the endangered species list is now showing the first signs of a possible recovery.

Another pilot study done with white marlin showed a possible problem with hook-and-release mortality. This led to a study with a total of 40 tags. 20 tags in white marlin caught with J-hooks and 20 caught with circle hooks. The results were amazing. About 35% of those caught on J-hooks died while all of those caught on circle hooks lived. Wow, what an eye opener and as this data has gotten out more and more billfish anglers have switched to circle hooks. In fact, the winner of the recent Virginia Beach Billfish Tournament caught their fish on circle hooks. This has also led to new regulations. Starting in 2008, marlin fishermen are going to have to use circle hooks. Now here is the rub. Both David Agee and the CCA want to extrapolate data done with circle hooks on other species to striped bass. You just can't do that because the preliminary studies done with blue marlin, a very close relative of the white marlin, show that they are surviving hook and release with J-hooks just fine. So now NOAA fisheries is trying to figure out how to create a rule to protect white marlin without imposing a regulation on the blue marlin fishery that is

not supported by the science. Without studying the release mortality of this fishery, (large striped bass, cold water, high salinity, live bait, circle hooks and J-hooks) we have nothing to base any regulations on.

The VSWFT recognizes release citations for large striped bass caught in the bay during the closed seasons. Catch and release is legal in these waters during these times. Recognizing these citations help to encourage anglers to fish even when they cannot keep any fish. This helps support the bayside economies that benefit from the striped bass fishery. This particularly helps the bayside communities of the Eastern Shore. Marinas, tackle shops, and charter captains all benefit while we are out fishing. Catch and release fishing has been fantastic at Plantation Light the past three Januaries. Some at VMRC are concerned that promoting this catch and release fishery may not be a good thing due to hook-and-release mortality. Here is the study to find out. If the hook and release mortality is negligible, we should support this fishery and local economies it benefits. If we find that we are killing a lot of these fish, then we should change something. Right now, all we have are opinions.

The CCA calls for the use of non-offset circle hooks. Is there data for this? So far, the research I am helping with has shown no difference in hook location with offset and non-offset circle hooks. Counter-intuitive but that is what the research is showing. Of course, this research is with billfish and trying to use data from one species on another can lead you to false assumptions.

The power of this technology is amazing. Where it is used it makes other means of estimating release mortality obsolete. Also, finding out where fish go is now a given, not a hoped for thing as with regular tags. Bluefin tuna have been managed as two distinct stocks to the detriment of the United States. These tags are showing that this has been an incorrect assumption. What they are catching in the eastern Atlantic is affecting our stocks here. We could not prove this prior to this technology.

The downside is size and cost.

The cost is somewhat less in that you get 100% return of tags and these tags are recording data the entire time they are deployed so a study of 10 tags can give you more information than a study done with thousands of conventional tags.

The size of these tags has meant that they could only be used on large fish like marlin and tuna. A new generation of tags, half the size, has opened up some exciting possibilities including this proposal of study of our large striped bass, live-bait fishery.

What happens to that 48-inch fish that was just caught and released at the high rise of the Chesapeake Bay Bridge Tunnel or at Plantation Light on a live eel? Does it live or die? If it lives, does it stay there or will be at the Chesapeake Light Tower or off of Kitty Hawk tomorrow? David Agee assumes it will stay in the area it was caught. Studies done on other fish say that he is wrong. Even though there is bait in the area and plenty of the same species being caught, the tagged fish has moved onto somewhere else. White marlin caught at the Triple Os are up off of New Jersey on the far side of the gulf

stream in a couple of days even though other white marlin are concentrated at the Triple 0s. So what is happening with these striped bass? Do we have a population which moves into an area and stays there as long as there is bait or do we have schools of fish moving through an area and going elsewhere all of the time? We just don't know, yet.

This technology can answer these questions and as an angler, this is the kind of research I support. It gives me answers now. It is not like the sheepshead studies that both the CCA and David Agee support. We are learning what the average age of a 10-pound sheepshead is but we are not getting any information on how best to manage the stock. The tagging study of sheepshead has not generated any data at all. Unlike these studies, pop-up satellite tags give us immediate answers that both anglers and fishery managers can use right now.

I want answers. Why don't we have a night-time striped bass fishery? Oh we have one, but it is at the bridges or other light sources. We know these fish feed night and day and the surf casters up north catch more and larger rockfish at night. Why is it when we are catching big rockfish up until dark at Plantation Light or off of Sandbridge, they shut off at dark and you don't catch anymore and if you are there early, before first light, you don't catch any until first light? Where are these fish when it is dark? Are they there and not feeding or do they go to the bridges? Are those fish I'm catching at Plantation during the daytime the same ones that I am catching at the high-rise at night? This technology can tell us exactly what is going on with these fish.

This technology has the potential to answer a lot of our questions on inshore fisheries. We have placed a lot of tags in big black and red drum. We have had good returns of tags placed in little drum but almost no returns on these large fish. What is going on. Are we killing them? Where are they going? We just don't know. We can find out.

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